Depot Town Rag

Volume 18, Number 11 *"All the news in one block in one month."*

November 1995

100% FREE Rag Content

- Sisters & Richard expanding
- ***Unique apt.***
- **Trip to Ireland**
- Slogans & mottoes
- A district dynasty is *French*

and other strictly local stuff. . . .

A Publication of the DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. P.O. Box 970-235, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197-0804

Holiday time down in Depot Town

- **Victorian Holiday**
  Saturday & Sunday, December 2 & 3
- **Festival of Lights**
  Thanksgiving through New Year's Eve in Riverside Park
- **New Year Jubilee**
  Throughout the City and in the Freighthouse

Depot Towners will continue their ancient tradition of kicking off the Christmas shopping season in December, a sharp contrast to other commercial districts who have been hyping Santa and the Elves since just after the Fourth of July Parade passed their businesses.

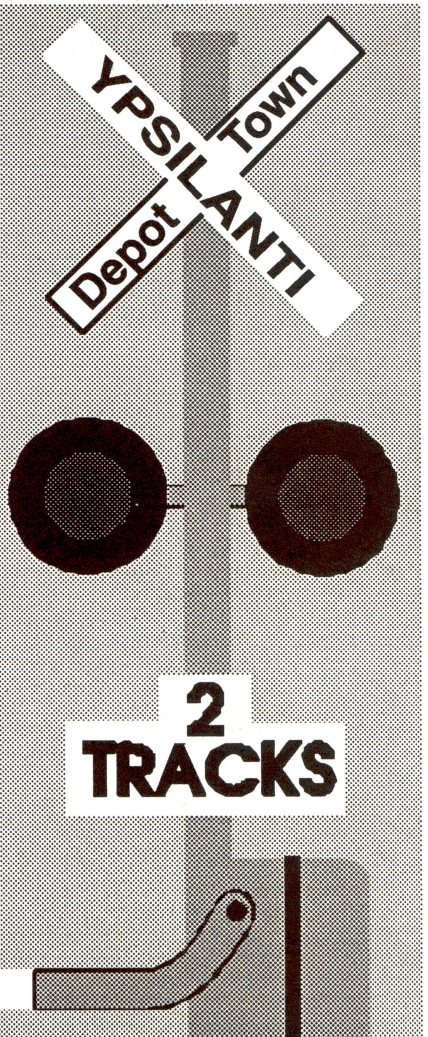
Replete with open houses, caroling, punch and cookies, Santa always comes back to this old block to make an appearance -- and just to rest among friends of tradition in the month when he is at his busiest.

"It's always a pleasure to come back to Depot Town during the *real* Christmas season," Claus told our reporter in December 1994, "and spend some time with my old friends who really know the value of the old fashioned ways of doing things."

How does he feel about the ubiquitous shopping center appearances he is called upon to make earlier and earlier each year? "I often think the kids are confused when they see me right alongside the Hallowe'en costumes. But I suppose it's good for business," he opined.

Meanwhile, Depot Town entrepreneurs are decorating their shop windows, sending out holiday invitations to valued clientele, and getting those Victorian costumes ready for what has proven to be one of the most successful open house weekends of the year. Many 'regulars' at this event tie it in with a walk through the beautifully lighted Festival of Lights in Riverside Park. For many, it is a visit back to the 'old days' they never knew, and this weekend always proves to be a highlight of their holiday.

We've been working on the railroad



Anyone crossing the Amtrak/Conrail tracks at East Cross Street this summer wouldn't believe it, but this district has had a long and happy relationship with the railroad since the mid-nineteenth century when the rail line first stretched west from Detroit. Today's crossing and our lead story for November are in great contrast to that history, however.

When the rail line stretched to Ypsilanti, it came right up to the front porch of the Great Western Hotel on East Cross Street. When they decided to continue the line to Ann Arbor and Chicago, the hotel was demolished and the bricks were saved by Benjamin Follett for the construction what is now The Thompson Block on North River Street.

As the years passed on, this district enjoyed close association with the railroad industry with a stock yard, side tracks, team tracks, a water tower, round house, freight house, and - most important of all - the most magnificent passenger depot up and down the Michigan Central Rail Road.

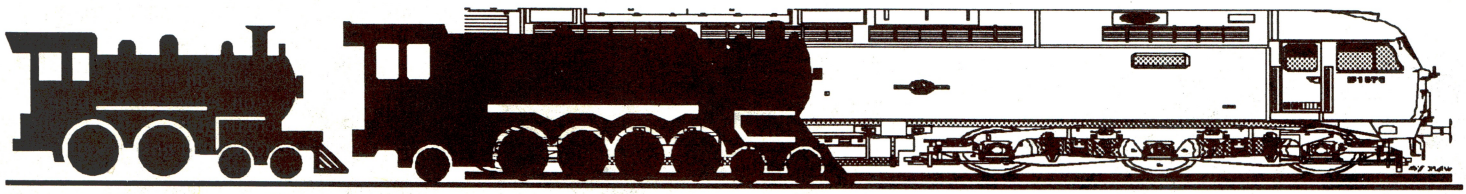
Sadly, the MCRR never finished their other towering depot in Detroit and it stands in decay today. Ypsilanti's much older edifice has been on the verge of death since it closed, but it was finally wrested from Amtrak and put into private hands several years ago. Modest improvements were made and now the owners say they'll sell - if anyone is still interested.

During World War II there were as many as twenty-six passenger train stops here a day, but by the 1980s, only the commuter train from Chelsea to Detroit stopped in Ypsilanti. After its demise, only private excursion trains for rail fans and six stops by the Artrain have used the sidings in this old district.

Kids still wave as long as there's a freight with a real caboose at its end, but mostly the railroad fans gather in - or around - the old caboose which DTA has loaned to the Ypsilanti Police Department as a neighborhood sub-station.

The Freighthouse has probably been the City's greatest recent railroad success story. Bought from Conrail and turned into a home for the Farmers' Market, it continues to shelter shoppers twice a week and offer excellent space for community events.

See what may be the end of our recent case with the railroad that has continued longer than the Simpson trial. [pp.2 & 3]



Railroaded through Depot Town . . .

[We reprint the article we published back in August of 1994:]

Someone's painting the town - and RR may press charges

Conrail's track inspector, Chris Miranda, was all around the district last month trying to find out who painted the railroad's property at what may be the busiest intersection in town. The tiny Corten steel shack between the new Crossing Guard Tower and the abandoned MCRR depot was painted dark green last month - and nobody seems to know who did it or why. Railroad officials are reasonably upset, since the structure houses sensitive machinery which can be affected by drastic temperature changes and cause the signals to be defective. Computer chips and heat-sensitive fans may be affected by the dark green paint job, speculate railroad officials. Removing the dark green paint could cost up to $7000, claims Miranda, and they'd like to know where the bill should be sent.

"I talked to City officials, first," said Chris on a recent Saturday morning, "and they suggested 'those folks down in Depot Town' might know something." Amid slurs such as, "They act like they own the place," and other anti-proprietary insults, the un-named City official disclaimed any knowledge of the offense, and quickly passed it down the block.

Not even those folks whose front shop windows face the structure saw anything out of order. "I noticed it was green one day," said River Artworks' Paul Fetters, "but couldn't have told you what color it was before that or how long it had been that color."

Actually, Corten steel is not to be painted in any way - and that's why the railroad installed such a structure. Corten first became recognized in the '60s in the new International Harvester world headquarters and then again in the '70s when UM built its new Art and Architecture building on North Campus. Sealed by the oxidation (rust), the surface was supposed to remain impermeable after installation. UM maintenance officials argued that their example still needed sealing - and have since replaced it.

Still, neighborhood wags wonder who might have taken it upon themselves to go to all the effort to paint someone else's building for them. It was hardly a quality paint job, observed alarmed neighbors. "They even painted over the lock!" said Miranda. Informal inventigators suspect a ladder was used - and wonder how anyone could have painted the whole thing all the way to the tip of the roof without being noticed on that busy corner.

Speculation mounted up and down Cross and River streets last month: Did someone think it better complemented the colors on the Crossing Guard Tower? Was the City warming up to last spring's threat to paint the Thompson Block? Was this the begining of a new restoration effort on the depot? Did someone just have some left over green paint from a recent project? During that portion of the summer, only O.J. land Kato had a perfect alibi; they were in court.

And so might our local preservationist/pranksters, say railroad officials who are eager to close this case and preserve safety along this part of their Detroit/Chicago line.

Anyone with informatin about this questionable historic preservation project can call Conrail's Chris Miranda at 313-297-5564.

[A week after that issue was out there was much specutlation on the block about the mysterious paint job. Many said they had been questioned by the railroad's representative and others said they had called the numbers published, but not one could get anyone from the railroad to answer. Two neighbors reported seeing what had actually happened and would share that information with the railroad - if they could only make a connection.

This was our follow-up a week later:]

5 August 1994
General Manager, Conrail
Willow Run Yard
2575 Ecorse Road
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197

Dear sir:

Just a month ago your track inspector, Chris Miranda, took the time one Saturday morning to meet with me about his concerns of vandalism to your properties in the Depot Town, area. So impressed were we with the problem, that we featured an article on it in the August issue of *The Depot Town Rag*. As Chris requested, we published his phone number with the article so anyone with information could contact him. Much evidence has turned up, but that line of communication to Conrail has not been at all effective.

I have personally called Miranda's number (297-5564) at different times every day for a month with no response other than a co-worker who answered for him once who said he would relay the message. There was no response. On another occasion I called his home number and left a message with his wife to please call me back for this information. He did not.

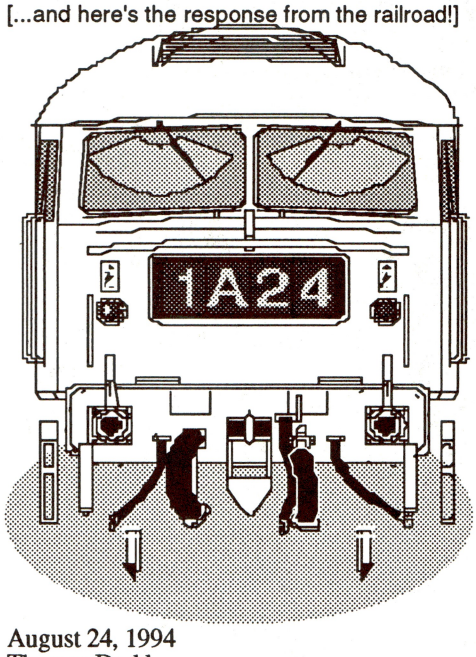
Neither have calls to your Freight Agency Coordinated Terminal (482-7962) or your Yard Office (483-5101) been effective. These are the only numbers you list in the Ameritech Pages Plus - but no one has answered for a month now.

There has been much evidence passed on to us from our readers since you don't answer your phones and perhaps a letter through the U.S. Mail is the best way to let you know that we need to get together to discuss it.

If I do not get a response to this, either, shall I conclude that there was no problem with vandalism as stated by Mr. Miranda? I find it as hard to believe that is the case as I find it difficult to believe that no one at Conrail has been at their phone for a month - and eagerly await your call.

Very truly yours,
Tom Dodd, secretary
Depot Town Association, Inc.
1680 Cliffs Landing
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198
Enclosed: August *Rag*
Copy: Chris Miranda

[...and here's the response from the railroad!]



August 24, 1994
Thomas Dodd
1680 Cliffs Landing
Ypsilanti, MI 48198

A/D 6/29/94 Location: MP 29.4, Cross & River Sts. Amt. Unknown

Dear Mr. Dodd,

This letter is to advise you of Contrail's intentions to recover our loss for property damage sustained in the incident referenced above.

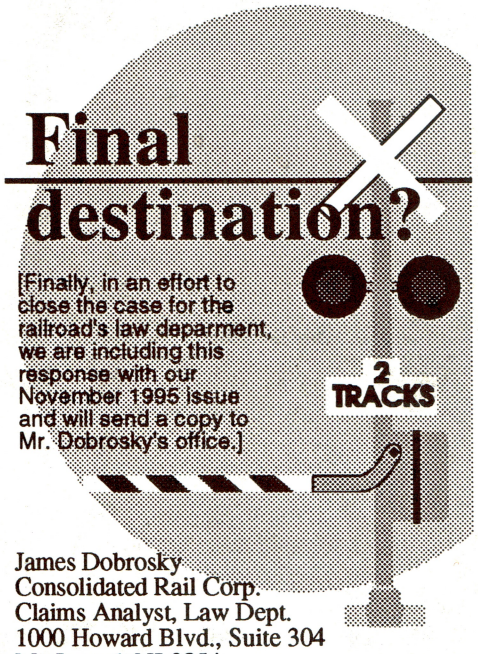
In the event you are covered by insurance, please submit this letter and the attached cost statement to your carrier and providce me with your policy number and the name and address of your insurance company. If there is no cost statement attached, please put your insurance company on notice, furnish information to Conrail, and the statement will be forwarded to them as soon as possible.

If you wish to resolve this matter with Conrail, you may remit your full payment for Consolidated Rail Corporation, the address shown below.

If I can be of assistance please do not hestitate to call me at (609) 231-2192.

Very truly yours
- James Dobrosky
Consolidated Rail Corp.
Claims Analyst, Law Dept.
1000 Howard Blvd., Suite 304
Mt. Laurel, NJ 08054

[Upon reading Mr. Dobrosky's communication, one local merchant called him in New Jersey and told of seeing who painted the shack in question. So far, we have seen no response to that information and we assume he still awaits payment from the editor's insurance company.]


Final destination?
[Finally, in an effort to close the case for the railroad's law deparment, we are including this response with our November 1995 issue and will send a copy to Mr. Dobrosky's office.]
2 TRACKS

James Dobrosky
Consolidated Rail Corp.
Claims Analyst, Law Dept.
1000 Howard Blvd., Suite 304
Mt. Laurel, NJ 0854

Dear Mr. Dobrosky,

I have received your letter of claim and have turned it over to my attorney. Although you do not describe the "incident referenced above" in your letter, I assume you speak of the painting of the signal shack in our neighborhood - an act for which your representative asked my assistance in discovering. I have included a copy of the letter sent to your Willow Run Yard and inform you that neither my numerous phone calls nor my letter of August 5, 1994 have received a response from your representatives. Your own letter of August 24, 1994 was the first response from the company and leads me to believe that your agent had no intention of conducting a full investigation of possible vandalism to your property.

As this situation has unfolded in the past year, I conclude that your representative did not seek facts as he toured the district, but let it be known to many citizens that "Tom Dodd painted our building and he's going to pay for it!" In actuality, I had even been hestitant to paint my own building for the fifteen years I lived there and only once did I paint another's building - when my partner and I painted the original facade back on to a de-nuded architectural example on the block. We received compensation and press coverage for that job and did not paint over any locks or keyholes.

Your own letter suggests that my insurance company may have some interest in your problem. Sorry. I have no policy which covers the vandalism of others. I can only assume that you were acting from misinformation from your employees far down the tracks from your New Jersey office. After your company's response to my help in this matter, you are well advised to check your own policies for coverage. You could very well be hearing from my own attorney in response.

I am including this letter in our next-to-final issue of our monthly neighborhood newsletter which we have published for nearly twenty years. If you plan to write back, please try to make our third Thursday deadline (16 Nov.).

Very truly yours,
Tom Dodd, editor, *The Depot Town Rag*

Unique living space is available next month

One of the district's truly singular apartments will soon be open for occupancy and the owners are making this unusual space available beginning December first. While many of the district's second and third floors were originally designed for the families of the shop owners who operated on the first floor, the spaces in the former Follett House have only recently been converted from nineteenth century hotel rooms to spacious apartments with high, high ceilings.

Such living accomodations are not often available in the neighborhood these last ten years, since most owners move in permanently and tenants tend to stay five or ten years or longer. A career move to the far side of Detroit has dictated the move that made this delightful space available.

Stretching 56 feet from the front of the building to the back, this apartment has a front door *and* a back porch. The modern, open plan boasts a cavernous living room/dining room, an adjacent and up-to-date kitchen, a bath, den/guest room, and a full laundry room. Biggest surprise of all at this second floor address is the spiral oak stairway that leads to a huge master suite on the third floor with its own private bath. With two private entires, a full complement of household applilances, 11.5-foot ceilings, hardwood floors, brick walls, access to two decks, this 1500+ square-foot brick-walled apartment is truly an unusual find.

Featured on several home tours and visited by architectural study groups and classes, this unusual home is not the kind often found on the open market. Neither are most of Depot Town's living spaces advertised on the usual market, since there's often a line of folks waiting to move into a district with such ambience and reputation. Don't look for ads in the dailies for this one; it's only being touted in *The Rag*.

Interested parties are encouraged to call the owners (who designed the space for themselves and lived in it for many happy years!) and let them know of their interest at $850 per month. Call them at 483-4256. Deposits, references, and neighborly intentions are a requisite.

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In Ypsilanti's historic Depot Town

It's a family tradition

The 'French connection' has been good for Depot Town

Back in 1975, a bunch of Depot Towners sat around one of the neighborhood bars and talked about organizing the district for the common good of its business people and residents. They talked Gerry French, then co-owner of the Alibi Bar, into serving as the neighborhood association's first president. They organized, applied for tax-exempt status, became a non-profit incorporation and started having monthly meetings to see what they could do about their broken sidewalks and pot-holed street

Not many years later, when the Alibi had become Aubree's Saloon, Gerry's brother, Bill, followed in that tradition, serving as president of the Depot Town Association for two terms in a row. The replication of the Crossing Guard Tower and its 'shadow signs' pointing the way to this old block became Bill's legacy.

Bill's wife, Sandee French, also served several stints on DTA's board, sometimes as secretary, always active on one committee or other.

Now, in 1995, Sidetrack Grill's co-owner, David French, has been elected to the same positon held by two of his older brothers.

The tension must be building for sister, Linda, co-owner along with David at their track-side location. The only French who's not thinking about the next election is Skip; the bar he owns is in Florida and that's just too far away for regular attendance at those monthly neighborhood meetings.

Thanks to this dynamic family, our block has enjoyed competent and able leadership through a whole generation of district activity and promotion. With this stable background, it is bound to continue long into the future.

Free ride to Ireland starts right here

[Monday, 27 November, 7-8:30 P.M.]

We invite you to share an enticing evening of Irish stories and information regarding the EMU travel study program, "An Intimate Look At Ireland." This unique six-day program is planned for July of 1996 in Southern Ireland, being housed in Batt Burns' home town of Sneem, a small, charming fishing village located on the Ring of Keily. Batt Burns is headmaster of the National School of Sneem, County Kerry, Ireland. He is author of seven books on Irish history and culture, and was recently honored as the outstanding teacher and storyteller in the Republic of Ireland.

Batt has collected an impressive store of Irish folklore, primarily form County Kerry, and is one of the few people in Ireland committed to the preservation of the ancient art of storytelling in the Irish tradition.

Touted as "a special program for thinking adults," the program is one of many offered at Eastern Michigan University's Depot Town Center at 32 East Cross Street.

For more information or to register for this free introduction, call the Depot Town Center Office at 487-6815 or 487-0407 and ask for "Lifespan Learning."

Depot Town Association, Inc., 19 October 1995

• **Minutes of September** approved as published

• **Treasury report approved.** Judi Monaghan volunteered for post of assistant treasurer.

Committee Reports:

• **DDA:** Sandee French reported that she will have a flyer ready for business owners and property owners regarding pricing on greenery, bows, and lights for holiday decorating. Depot Town buildings to sport greenery, bows, and white mini lights; tree to the north of Signal Tower dressed in red mini lights with white star at the top; and Signal Tower will be lighted with its mini lights and Christmas wreaths. The benches DDA purchased are now out to be used and appreciated - three new benches out on Cross Street.

• **Riverside Arts Center:** The Center is starting a membership drive. They also are planning to ask individuals interested in renting the facility to acquire a special events permit.

• **Farmers Market Advisory:** Gary Urich has handed out lease applications and has interest from new people wanting space to lease. A new way to remind leasers of monthly payments will be tried out. Coupons will be used as reminders with a penalty charged for late payments. If you are interested in joining the Friends of the Freighthouse and working to preserve the Freighthouse building, contact Gary Urich.

• **Bylaws:** The committee to review the bylaws is making progress and expects to have completed proposals for November's meeting of the DTA.

• **Rag Report:** Exciting articles on business expansions, holiday time, and the French Connection.

• **Chamber of Commerce:** The Chamber is doing a series of lectures on Mission Health:

Reducing Workplace Stress and Anxiety, Oct. 26
Cutting Cost of Workman's Compensation, Dec. 6
Time: Managing Your Most Important Commodity, Feb. 15
Drug Testing in the Worksplace, April 18
Handling Anger: Yours and Others, June 5

The Great Communicator seminars are $15 each and run from 7:30-9:00 A.M. For more information, call 482-4992.

• **Special Events:** The Hot Rod Club will hold a sing event in Depot Town. They will lbe contacting businesses for sponsorship.

Unfinished Business:

• **Depot Town pamphlet** is still in the works.

• **Kiosk** sign is soon to be updated.

• There was a discussion concerning a plan to put in **islands at each end of Cross Street** in Depot Town. Some grant money is available. More to come on this proposal.

• **Next meeting** to be held 16 November 1995 at 6 P.M. at Renewed Interest Antiques.

• **Best Yet Award** goes to ALL people involved in getting our new benches - planners, orderers, and installers.

• **Golden Goose** awarded to those involved in destroying the plaza and freighthouse benches.

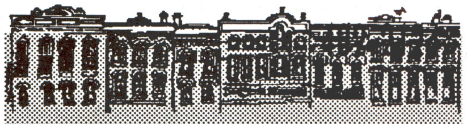
November DTA meeting:

Should DTA renew its membership in the Ypsilanti Chamber of Commerce? Chamber members from Depot Town are asked to speak to the issue and help make a decision.

DDA installs lights and benches

The Depot Town Downtown Development Authority has arranged through Detroit Edison for the installation of electrical outlets in 15 of the light poles on the block. Watch for greens and lights to be installed to coordinate with the November 17 opening of the Festival of Lights. New lights will also grace the pine tree just north of the railroad crossing and lights and wreaths will be display on the Crossing Guard Tower.

Three steel benches have been installed along the block with the same funds -- just in time to replace some of the earlier ones which have been destroyed by vandals. Even concrete benches at the Freighthouse have suffered this humiliating treatment and the plaques honoring the donors of those benches are gone.



THE DEPOT TOWN RAG

A publication of the Depot Town Association, Inc. a nonprofit, tax-exempt corporation dedicated to preserving the unique character of the neighborhood and to the enhancement of its business climate. -Tom Dodd, editor

The Depot Town Association, Inc.
David French, president
P.O. Box 970-235
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197-0804

The Depot Town Rag
Tom Dodd, editor
1680 Cliffs Landing
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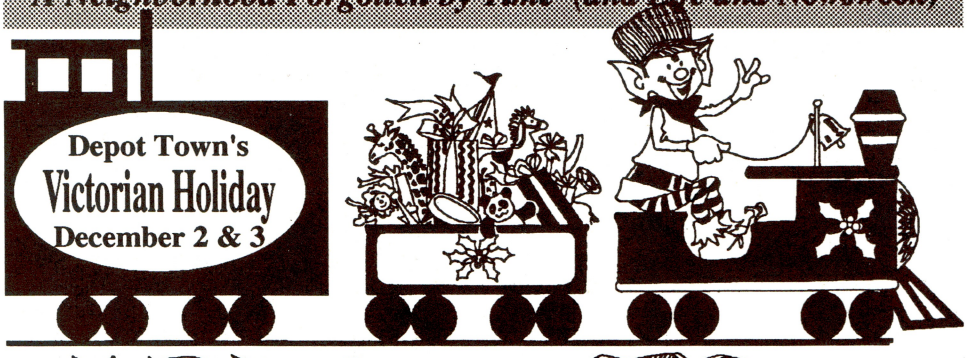
Dateline: Depot Town

A Neighborhood Forgotten by Time (and Life and Newsweek)



Open houses at many shops and businesses welcome old friends and new, alike. Holiday cookies, glasses of punch, and - if you've been really, really, good all year - there are even gifts for some of the folks who travel from shop to shop. Sometimes you'll have to buy them, though.

Window designs - like you saw when you were a kid - still proliferate in this district. It's an old, old tradition to stroll the block and just gape at the displays set up in almost every shop window along North River and East Cross Streets. And you can park alongside the curb and just watch the people who pass by.

"Depot Town? Isn't this something like what the the malls were trying to do?"

Santa always makes an appearance on the block for this weekend and he attests to his approval at having to do this only in December! After all, this is his busiest season and he's a busy man! Watch for signs around the block and you'll find him in some of the most comfortable surroundings of the season: by the old caboose, at a favorite shop, sitting at his table at a local eatery. Most often, he's just sauntering up the street, smiling and waving at old friends.

Awnings at Remington-Walker

The west end of the Follett House received new roll-up awnings in October, proving once again, that lettering them makes one of the most effective advertising motifs in the block.

The west window's reads, "Antiques • Fine Furnishings," while two awnings facing south announce, "Remington-Walker," and "Remington-Walker Design Studio". The shop's center bay is accented by an elegant nameplate with brass pineapples approriately symbolizing hospitality. The windows, of course are ready for Christmas... but aren't they always?

Sisters expanding

In their second expansion since opening, Me 'N' My Sisters at 13 E. Cross are quintupling their window display area as they move into 500+ square feet more sales space in the former card shop. After suffering only one tiny display window for son long, the Sisters will now enjoy five windows and will soon divide them into multiple panes and new signage for their elegant country craft and gift business. October saw them expand into a new gourmet line of coffee beans and later hours (see ad on page six).

Reid's Hair Station doubles

Twice the floor space will be the effect of the remodeling going on at Richard Reid's Hair Station as Reid and Company open the wall between #50 and #48. Depot Towners from the Sixties will remember the last time the entire expanse was open to contain the many booths of the Old Town Bazaar. That design was so complicated and circuitous that a path had to be painted on the floor to lead shoppers from one crowded booth to another.

Reid's redux will certianly not be so crammed with artsy artifacts, but sparse, clean, and modern like his other elegant rehabs around the town.

Holiday House a success

October saw one of the biggest off-season weekend, ever, down here. Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation's event at James Breakey Manor lent a proper Victorian air to the entire town, while the Ypsilanti Fire Department celebrated their 100th year with spectacular expositions in Riverside Park. Across the river in Depot Town, Me 'N' My Sisters Country Store, Remington Walker Design Associates, and Designs On You welcomed new and old friends to their recently remodeled and expanded shops. It was a pre-season event and it worked. Now we have the rest of the year to revisit those wonderful shops down in Depot Town and find Christmas and holiday gift and decorating items about which we can brag, "Oh, I found this darling little shop down by the railroad station . . ."

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Ypsilanti's FARMERS' MARKET

Saturday shows of truly unique Christmas gift and holiday craft items

Wednesdays and Saturdays
***Open all year* in the freighthouse**
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Candles • Tinware • Lamps • Dried Florals
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Bunnies • Angels • Toys 'N' More

A Depot Town SAMPLER

Corny, old slogans set the theme for sixty years

"Time's the test; old ways are best!" That's the slogan that hung on the wall in our editor's childhood bedroom and maybe that accounts for the fact that he still hangs out in Depot Town and still fights with the railroad. It's an old tradition.

That must account for the value system of most folks down in Ypsilanti's old railroad district, as well, since they bemoan the commercialization of the annual August Heritage hoopla, but turn out with great enthusiasm for an old car show, the Farmers' Market expositions, home-cooked meals, shopping from door-to-door up and down our streets, and visiting with friends and neighbors in the middle of the street and sidewalks. They turn out for a parade of antique fire engines and, in March, they'll turn Irish and get in the parade themselves! They salute and applaud when the flag goes by on Independence Day, and they stop to talk to dogs who sleep on the sidewalk on summer afternoons. The holiday season certainly tests the 'old ways' slogan, too, as shop windows are decorated, lights are strung, and truly heartfelt greetings of the season are shared amongst them.

Those times are so good, apparently, that other not-so-seasoned commercial districts have tried to stretch that same holiday into a several-month observance of gift splurging and guilt-tripping.

And that brings to mind the other slogan that hung on the editor's wall when he was a kid: It showed a pair of Scotty dogs - one black and one white, looking as if they should have magnets for feet - and the inscription read "Smile; for from the time you were born, 'til you ride in a hearse, there's nothing so bad that could not have been worse."

Hmmm. Still not understanding what those dogs had to do with anything, our editor smiles as often as possibe, especially when passing a funeral home. But most of those smiles come when he sees a 'Christmas Sale' in July, August, September, October ... or even November.

The old ways *are* best and down in Ypsi's old railroad district we're kind of trapped in them ... but we don't seem to mind it one bit.

NOTICE:

December will be *The Depot Town Rag's* final issue.

Deadline for copy, ads, testimonials, reminiscences, praise, or blame is due by Thursday, 16 November.

- the editor

Come see what Nature sent us this month . . .

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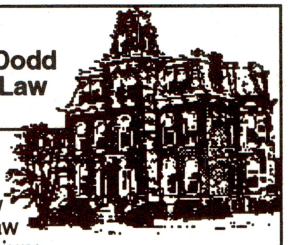

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